

MONTJUÏC STADIUM : READY FOR THE FUTURE



*The renovated Olympic Stadium
in the heart of the Montjuïc Ring,
an image which will soon be
familiar round the world.*

By Andy Robinson

By Barcelona's standards, the Montjuïc Olympic Stadium, built for the 1929 Universal Exhibition, was a rather uninspired piece of architecture. Its architect, Pere Domenech, would have been the first to acknowledge that his father's extraordinary designs for the Palau de la Musica or San Pau hospital, completed thirty years before, during the golden years of Barcelona's 'modernist' movement, were far superior. Even within the context of the 1929 Exhibition, the stage for a display of architecture of inconsistent quality, the stadium barely stood out. The exaggerated pomp of the Palau Nacional made the stadium look austere and humourless. Set against the icy formalism of Mies van de Rohe's pavilion, it appeared over-decorated.

Fifty years later, its grass pitch parched by the post-war sun, its terraces abandoned by all but the wind, and its facade sagging, few would have stopped to discuss its architectural merits. Some architects suggested knocking it down and building something more adventurous. Most were not really interested. Yet, the rather ordinary facade of Pere Domenech's 1929 Olympic Stadium has been painstakingly restored to its original condition for the '92 Games. This, more than any of the internationally acclaimed architectural projects undertaken for the '92 Barcelona Olympics, shows the advanced stage urbanistic and architectural thinking has reached in this city. Advanced enough to realise that if a building has historical and sentimental value, it almost inevitably looks good too.

The generation that separated Pere Domenech from his father seems like five in the history of architecture. The elaborate, mystical forms of the 'modernists' were rejected by their successors and a new school of 'pure' neo-classical art and architecture emerged in the '20's which assumed the appropriately monumental label 'noucentisme'.

CURVED STANDS : AN OLD IDEA

In harmony with the 'noucentista' spirit, Domenech drew up plans for a 50,000 capacity stadium embodying the essential features of a Roman amphitheatre, spiced up with a few of the neo-Baroque touches that typified the architectural style of the Exhibition. A classical approach was chosen to meet technical as well as aesthetic imperatives. The two long stands on either side of the tracks were imperceptibly curved to increase visibility, an architectural innovation first employed in the stadium in ancient Athens.

The location of the stadium, on the landward slope of Montjuïc, could also be traced back to classicism and its most celebrated hero, Hercules, who according to

Greek mythology, founded the city, together with the crew and passengers of the ninth boat - barca nona, Barcelona - of a fleet sent from Greece to take him back home. The other eight boats sank off the curious escarpment that dropped sheer into the Mediterranean, Montjuïc.

ONLY WEMBLEY HAD BIGGER CAPACITY

Of all the other European stadiums, only Wembley in London has a greater capacity than Barcelona's. Moreover, all 50,000 spectators at Montjuïc would enjoy good views of the track, unlike those at Wembley who, to see events at the far end of the track, were forced into neck-stretching exercises that would have tested an Olympic gymnast.



The first stone was laid on April 5th, 1927 and completed, according to schedule, in spring 1929. The successful tender had come from 'Construcciones y Pavimentos S.A.' who undoubtedly impressed the public accountants with their precise cost estimate of 3,706,688.95 pesetas.



An innovation at the time, the curved stands to give spectators better visibility.

The stadium was officially opened by King Alfonso XIII on May 20th, an event whose historical significance was surpassed, at least for the Barcelona crowd, some hours later when the Catalan XII beat English F.A. Cup holders Bolton Wanderers 4-0 in the opening football match.

Between 1929 and 1936, the stadium became the stage for some bitterly fought contests, notably the world heavyweight boxing title between Max Schmelling and Paulino Uzcudum and a medieval joust. In 1936, a larger scale battle interrupted events when the Civil War broke out, forc-

good ones to come when Barcelona Football Club beat Espanol 1-0 in the Final of the Generalísimo Cup.

Ironically, the meteoric growth that Barcelona experienced in subsequent years left the stadium crumbling in its wake. Barcelona Football Club built a new ground which made the Olympic Stadium look like a Roman ruin in comparison and, as a collective desire to forget the past gripped Barcelona, the stadium's future went into the balance.

In 1982, the new democratic city council decided to seek nomination for the '92 Olympic Games and, as architects the world over sketched ideas for the definitive post-modern stadium in a city where the most avant-garde architectural projects had been approved by the authorities, the demolition firms checked their explosives and oiled their bulldozers. But the council's memory was too keen to allow the 1929 stadium to disappear into oblivion and, as if to reclaim the city's past, it decided not only to spare the old building but to turn it into the centrepiece of the Olympic project. As Catalan architect Oriol Bohigas, one of the key influences in the decision to restore the stadium, explained :

MODERNIZED BY THE ITALIAN GREGOTTI

"Restoring and reusing a stadium built in 1929 and now a semi-ruin, is an exceptional decision that can only really be understood from a certain social and cultural viewpoint. The justification for conserving an obsolete object is a collective memory that persists in bestowing it meaning."

The job of modernizing the stadium and adapting it to the demands of modern sport was given to the Italian architect Vittorio Gregotti, and the Catalan team Correa, Mila, Margarit and Buxadé. The final project involved gutting the original stadium, renewing the interior and restoring the exterior. It was an unevitable task; Preserving such a fragile facade while entirely rebuilding the inside was like stuffing a dead animal without breaking its skin.



Only the walls were kept...

ing the abandonment of the eagerly awaited Olimpiada Popular, whose inauguration coincided with the Generals' uprising.

In the bleak years of post-war austerity, the stadium provided sporadic distraction from the daily grind that life in Barcelona had become. In 1955, the Mediterranean Games were held there and, two years later, as the consumer boom of the sixties appeared on the horizon, the Montjuïc stadium provided the Catalans with conclusive evidence that bad times were over and

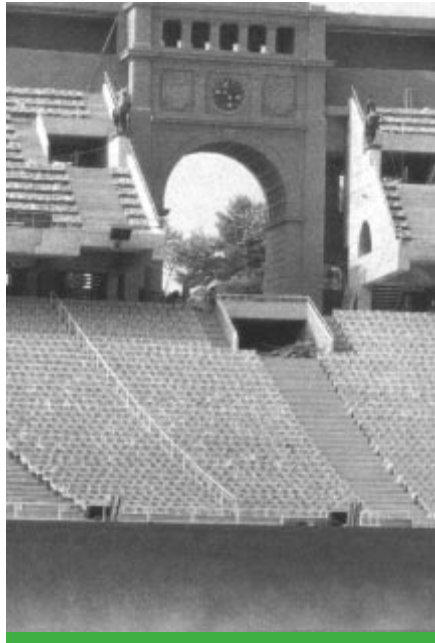
Some wondered whether 6,000 million pesetas was not rather too much for the kind of architectural taxidermy required, when knocking the whole thing down and starting again would have been far less expensive. But there were too many ghosts and memories in the old masonry to allow the council the easy option. As Buxadé and Margarit describe :

“The conservation of the original stadium is a symbol of the sentimental weight of the building, which has always been, even in its most penurious decades, ingrained as the centre of Catalan athletics and of amateur sport in general.”

INCREASING THE STADIUM'S CAPACITY

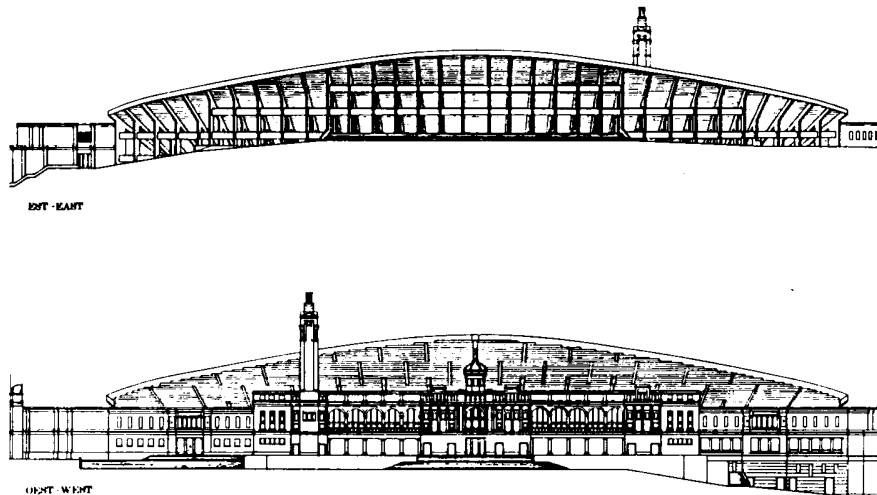
Gregotti and Correa's teams were fortunate in one respect, though. The track in the old stadium measured 600 metres while contemporary tracks only measure 400. This gave the architects the opportunity to increase the capacity of the stadium, not by adding to the height of the existing facade, nor by increasing its circumference, but by scooping out the centre and adding new terracing below the 1929 stands.

The 1989 track is 11 metres below the level of the original, allowing the architects to increase the capacity of the stadium to 70,000 without laying a finger on the original facade. Gregotti's inspired decision to extend the stadium not upwards but downwards has had some disorientating effects on the uninitiated, though. When some Spanish athletes arrived to try out the track for the first time in July, they gathered at the main entrance, an enormous arch restored to its 'noucentista' glory. Striding through what seemed like the threshold of time, the athletes found an eleven metre drop on the other side. The original arch is now mere decoration. Even the pole vaulters decided to turn back and use the other entrance.



Capacity was increased by adding new terracing to the original stands.

Inside the stadium, the juxtaposition of modern, functional forms cast in reinforced concrete and Pere Domenech's classicism is quite moving. So are the replicas of the two Greek-inspired, 'noucentista' horse-





Two “noucentista” horseriders, dramatic reminders of the brand new stadium’s origins.

riders whose mounts appear to be about to bolt into the vacuum that gapes before the cliff-like terraces. Perhaps the horses have been made nervous by the black-box minimalism of the enormous ‘Omega’ scoreboard which dominates the opposite end of the stadium.

“Most modern stadiums are hideous”, says Bohigas. “The Montjuïc Olympic Stadium, on the other hand, resolves the problem of reconciling the old and the new and creates a variety of space which is entirely new. It’s also very open, unlike many other stadiums which could easily be mistaken for gasometers.”

A long javelin throw from the refurbished Olympic stadium is Japanese architect, Arata Isozaki’s indoor sports hall, Palau de San Jordi. Shaped like a post-modern crab, it is an unmistakable product of its time. From the public viewpoint above the Olympic complex on Montjuïc, you can see both buildings set against Montjuïc cemetery and, further in the background, the new housing estates at the bottom of the hill. It is an image which embraces the past and the present, the dead and the living. Barcelona has done well to remember the past in its bid for the future.

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